Two New Observation Report Formats for Teachers in Training

By Jeffra Flaitz

This article concerns one of the problems that can emerge when teachers in training are compelled to observe and critique the performance of their peers or veteran teachers-namely, the awkwardness of, if not resistance to, the task of delivering criticism in a balanced, constructive, helpful manner. Following is a description, with examples, of two innovative teacher-evaluation techniques that were designed to be less incriminating and awkward for the teacher in training to use and which, to boot, proved to be more holistic than the traditional observation reports used in many teacher-training programs. In addition, an assessment of their usefulness-from the perspective of the teacher trainees -will be discussed.

These techniques were designed for a small group of nine students participating in a master's level course entitled "TESOL Practicum." Like their peers in many North American TESOL graduate programs, these students represented a variety of linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and even professional backgrounds. Upon introducing the course, the instructor announced a number of required observation and practice-teaching assignments and discussed the benefit of sitting in on classes conducted by veteran language teachers. She also discussed the usefulness of practice teaching before colleagues and the video camera, both with the aim of gaining insight into the language learning/teaching venture through the process of articulation-in other words, of friendly and constructive discussion and critique.

Throughout the semester the students responded conscientiously to these assignments. However, it was observed that they were much more willing to provide positive feedback about their observations than they were to deliver criticism. The group had used standard teacher-evaluation techniques commonly employed by supervisory personnel, including a dual-entry technique that required the observers to note almost minute by minute in one column the events and exchanges taking place in the classroom, while in another column writing their comments pertaining to the events under observation. The students also engaged in small- and large-group discussion of their observations, and when their peers taught micro-lessons before a video camera, they took turns delivering observations on the performance by passing the remote-control device around the classroom, stopping and starting the videotape at appropriate moments.

Nevertheless, regardless of the medium or forum chosen by the instructor, it was she and not the students who most often identified weaknesses in the performance of both practice teachers and experienced teachers. It was clear, however, that it was not inability to discern weaknesses in these performances that caused the students' reticence to deliver a balanced critique but rather their discomfort with the task itself. Nor was their reluctance to be critical of their peers and superiors attributable to an unfriendly or unsupportive classroom environment; on the contrary, from the outset this class was warm, informal, student-centered, and intimate-perhaps as much by happy accident as by design. Neither could it be said that the group did not have sufficient familiarity with observation techniques, as they had ample opportunity to experiment over the

course of the semester with several different approaches designed to highlight a variety of features of the language teaching/learning context.

For example, they constructed or altered a variety of checklists and seating-chart techniques, such as the SCORE (Seating Chart Observation Report) recommended by Richards and Nunan (1990). In addition, they identified a variety of cognitive styles among the pupils they observed, and isolated their own learning and teaching styles via a number of instruments developed by Ramirez and Castañeda (1974), among others. They also enjoyed and frequently used a modified version of Flanders's Interaction Analysis (Flanders 1970).

Thus, whether the problem lay with insecurity, distrust, embarrassment, cultural differences, or a belief that criticism of one's classroom presence is tantamount to criticism of one's personal integrity is unclear. Nevertheless, it was important to find some way to circumvent these perhaps justifiable fears and uncertainties in order to enable the students in the practicum to use their knowledge, experience, and sensibilities to arrive at a better understanding of the learning/teaching endeavor and to enhance their own classroom performance.

A Balance of Praise and Criticism

The two techniques that were subsequently developed sought to elicit both praise and criticism in a balanced way, and were intended to be used in tandem, although the underlying agenda was to provide a more comfortable vehicle through which to deliver criticism. As was mentioned earlier, the students experienced little difficulty generating praise for the teachers they had observed, but because their critiques tended to be lopsided, an element of excitement was lost, and the concern to refrain from offending anybody seemed to be the hidden agenda during discussion of observations. On the other hand, sometimes after observing a veteran teacher whose method, approach, or personal demeanor diverged from more popular practices, students might engage in an exclusively negative critique that failed to place the teacher's behavior in perspective or to recognize the teacher's strengths as well as weaknesses.

The objective, then, was to get the teacher trainees to articulate constructive criticism, something in which they had previously not received much practice. Therefore, in an attempt to breathe new life into the critique and to offer an opportunity to produce a more holistic rather than discrete-item measure of teacher effectiveness, the students were assigned two tasks.

Before describing these techniques, it is important to reiterate that what is described below was not designed for the benefit of teachers being observed and evaluated for professional purposes. Rather, they were developed for teacher trainees whose eyes, ears, and other sensibilities must be trained to detect not only the strengths and weaknesses of a given teacher's performance but the commonplace pedagogical practices and behaviors developed through trial and error and talent and time. The hope is that students might apply what they have learned from such an exercise to enhance their own teaching and avoid the necessity of reinventing the wheel.

Delivering Praise

Since delivering praise seemed to be the students' strongest suit, the exercise began with the task of identifying the strengths in a performance that had earlier been hailed as virtually unredeeming. The first step involved writing a speech honestly and without exaggeration, enumerating the virtues of a teacher or peer whom the student had recently observed. They were told to imagine that this teacher had been selected to receive a Teacher of the Year award, and they had been chosen to present the award. The address that was to accompany the award was to truthfully describe the strengths of the awardee's teaching based on the actual observation made earlier by the students. Thus, the students did not manufacture the speech "out of thin air." One of the ideas at work here was to convey the message that all teachers have positive qualities that need not be exaggerated or contrived, and that while a teacher may be ineffective at "this," s/he is likely to be more effective at "that." This is to say, none of us is perfect, and shortcomings are natural, nothing to be ashamed of. Following are some sample excerpts of what the students in the Practicum produced. All names are products of the students' imaginations. The benefit of creating pseudonyms will be addressed shortly.

SAMPLE #1: TEACHER OF THE YEAR
(excerpt)

Ladies and Gentlemen:

As we all know, Mr. Erie has been one of our best teachers, and we are proud of him. This year he has been chosen as the most devoted teacher in the city. I don't see any reason why I have to remind you now why he is acknowledged today as the best teacher. But just let me give some of the reasons for his receiving this award for fear that there might still be some people who do not know him very well.

First of all, Mr. Erie knows how to motivate students. He never forgets to encourage his students by praising them. Of course, praise is not the only good thing about him. When his students make a prepositional mistake, he tries to generalize the mistake by saying "Spanish-speaking students, please be careful not to say 'in the way to school' but 'on the way to school.'" This way he corrects the mistakes without having the student who made the mistake feel embarrassed.

Second, he has confidence in his teaching method. If he thinks the audiolingual method might be more appropriate for his students, he doesn't hesitate to use it, even though he is well aware of the criticism this method is receiving. His use of this out-of-fashion method is not from ignorance but from his confidence in it.

Third, his lessons have always been so well organized that he never confuses his students. His instructions are so clear that his students never get lost regarding what to do in class.

For these reasons, we are very proud to present him with this Teacher of the Year Award. Congratulations, Mr. Erie.

SAMPLE #2: TEACHER OF THE YEAR
(excerpt)

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am pleased to present this Teacher of the Year Award to Ms. Rona. Ms. Rona takes a personal interest in her students and is aware of the varying ability levels in her classroom. She teaches the individual, not a generic class. Her knowledge of each student allows her to adjust her instruction to the needs of that individual. For example, in verbal drill work, she poses the more difficult questions to the more advanced students. She also adjusts the speed of her speech to the listening-comprehension level of the student she is addressing. Not all would agree with her method, but we appreciate how she challenges advanced students while not frustrating those who are having difficulty. As long as each student is pushed beyond his own level, he will succeed.

At times, the students who wrote these make-believe speeches took the liberty of embellishing certain peripheral details unrelated to the actual teaching performance they had observed. However, they remained true to the real objective of the exercise, which was to identify the ways in which the observed teacher's performance was laudable. This information was later discussed by the whole group as it would have been in a more traditional observation debriefing exercise. In this case, though, the fictitious nature of the speeches helped the students become more engaged with the task. The speeches, for example, often drew applause and laughter, and the subsequent discussion tended to be richer and more lively.

Identifying Weaknesses

The task of identifying the weaknesses of an observed teacher's performance was addressed by a second technique. This time the students were asked to imagine that they were going to write an anonymous note to the teachers in hopes of enlightening them about some of the shortcomings of their teaching. Of course, it was made clear that, aside from using the anonymous-note technique in class, such forms of criticism would be deemed inappropriate and unprofessional with other TESOL specialists. Students were also engaged in a discussion about constructive versus destructive criticism prior to this assignment.

For the first time all semester, the students who were given this assignment produced copious yet thoughtful criticism, examples of which follow. It should be reiterated, however, that it was not for lack of ideas or reactions that students had previously resisted delivering criticism. Rather, they suggested to the instructor that they had not felt they had the proper medium through which to deliver their criticism.

SAMPLE #3: ANONYMOUS NOTE
(excerpt)

Dear Ms. Rose:

This is rather difficult for me to tell you, especially as it's spring, and the weather is so beautiful. But I thought that you might appreciate some little things that I may have to say about your teaching. I've always found you open to suggestions, and with that "largesse" of your heart, I'm sure you can take what I have to say.

I've been in your class so many times, but have felt that you've always been in such a great hurry. I know that Americans are fast, but you're faster. You hardly give us time to answer your questions, and when we're just about to answer, you break in with your answer. I feel like a flattened balloon, and so do the others. Please slow down, Ms. Rose.

Have you ever wondered how it feels when you can't understand and nobody explains? We feel so lost when you race on with your questions and hardly give us the opportunity to ask you questions. Our questions get piled up inside our heads, but you're there like a tornado that just breaks them down-"womp!"

SAMPLE #4: ANONYMOUS NOTE
(excerpt)

Dear Mr. Erie:

I know that you are a good teacher, and you enjoy teaching; however, as one of your former students, let me suggest something that will make you an even better teacher. Here is something I noticed and felt while I was your student.

It seems to me that grammatical accuracy is your biggest concern. I noticed you were always monitoring our English and encouraged us to speak it correctly. Monitoring is okay. Actually, I think it's supposed to be one of the teacher's functions. What I thought inappropriate was when you tried to correct us and made us repeat the form until we could say it correctly even when we were talking about what we did over the weekend. I felt intimidated when I had to open my mouth to talk about my vacation. When I had to talk in your presence, I had to turn each page of my grammar book in my head!

As was mentioned earlier, one of the keys to the success of this exercise was the use of pseudonyms given to the observed teachers and assumed by the practicing teachers. When students discussed the shortcomings of "Mr. Erie" and signed their notes "Madam X," they appeared to benefit from the fictitious personae they made up even though they knew to whom the pseudonyms referred. It was as if by imbuing themselves and others with surrogate identities they were able to release some of their creative potential, much like Georgi Lozanov's language learners do during an exercise in Suggestopedia (Stevick 1983:118). The use of an alias and the whole imaginary flavor of the assignment somehow made the delivery of criticism more palatable. This is not to imply that the students were totally comfortable with writing an

anonymous note containing mostly criticism, but that regardless of their reservations, they completed the assignment with surprisingly greater forthrightness than before.

A Successful Exercise

From the instructor's point of view, this evaluation exercise produced the most successful observation debriefing all semester, in that a more realistic balance of strengths and weaknesses was achieved in reviewing the observations in question. From the students' perspective, the two techniques described above possessed merit as well, and they were able to offer some specific comments as well as recommendations regarding ways to improve upon these two approaches. With respect to the use of make-believe names, for example, one student claimed:

It's a good idea to use pseudonyms in writing the Teacher of the Year speech and the anonymous note. It's like we are given a free hand to make our evaluation, and that evaluation can focus on something rather than someone; for example, on what the teacher did in class and not the teacher himself.

This comment reveals an aspect of teacher evaluation that is not always acknowledged, namely the difficulty of separating personal feelings about an individual teacher from professional judgment about the teacher's performance. The use of an alias apparently enabled this student to put enough distance between herself and the observed teacher to focus more on the teacher's skill than on the particulars of their relationship.

Several students also commented on the greater flexibility these two techniques offered them in comparison to more conventional evaluation procedures that involve checklists or limited space for comments pertaining to a prescribed set of categories. One student commented:

It's not easy to critique a particular teacher-more so if one's inexperienced. I've thus found this technique to be refreshing because of its more open, holistic approach and also because it gives one the opportunity to express more lucidly certain feelings, views, and criticisms. Further, as we were given a free hand at this, we were at liberty to stress or focus on certain aspects of our views. This obviously would have been difficult with the use of standard forms of evaluation.

Another student, too, cited the prose format of the exercises as a key element in promoting the success of the evaluation tasks. She asserted that it provided the students with "an opportunity for creativity and constructive criticism that had not been previously expressed." Moreover, she benefited not only from the task of writing the speech and anonymous note but from hearing her classmates read their works aloud. She argued that via this "comfortable, somewhat humorous form" she gained a better appreciation and respect for her colleagues' professional opinions and insights, and she suggested as well that their perspectives also helped her better analyze the teaching performance they had observed together.

Another student found it helpful to have two distinct vehicles by which to deliver her comments:

Part of my dilemma in writing the previous observation reports was my own desire to balance positive and negative comments. I think sometimes this "seeking a balance" influenced my reports too much. With the award letter and anonymous note, I was free to concentrate on one aspect at a time. I feel this helped my thoughts flow and made each a more fully formed critique.

On the other hand, students noted some shortcomings of the technique. They were concerned, for example, that in their zeal to prepare an acceptable speech, they might lose sight of the basic purpose of the activity. They advised that future students be reminded to retain as much objectivity as possible and not to sacrifice substance for eloquence. They also reiterated the obvious: that these techniques are training exercises only and would not be useful or appropriate for use outside the Practicum.

Several excellent recommendations for generating variations on this same theme of writing non-threatening, face-saving, and holistic observation reports included writing a letter of recommendation, a memorandum, a "don't forget" note, an introductory speech for a conference presentation, and a list of those behaviors that observers found useful (pair practice, reading strategies, follow-up), and those they did not (error correction, feedback, teacher-student relationship).

These alternative teacher-evaluation exercises provided a welcome respite from the more predictable and often embarrassing strategies traditionally used in teacher-training programs. Based on the educational benefit and personal enjoyment these techniques brought to the participants of the Practicum, members of other TESOL graduate programs-indeed teacher-training programs of any kind-are encouraged to experiment with them as they see fit.

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